

It's Natural, and Now It's Legal in Florida

by Patricia Leigh Brown

The Florida Legislature has guaranteed women the right to breast-feed in public.

It was somewhere at an altitude of 32,000 feet, breast pump in hand, airline blanket over my head, that I had a profound realization: If God had meant women to express breast milk on airplanes, he wouldn't have invented coach. I was reminded of this and other sitcom memories of nursing motherhood last week upon reading the news that the Florida Legislature, in a unanimous vote, guaranteed women the right to breast-feed their children in public, the first state to do so. According to a newspaper account, the purpose of the law is to protect women from "archaic and outdated moral taboos," including any "laws and lascivious behavior" and harassment that a woman nursing in public might receive.

Women have been harassed, but "there have been no recent arrests relative to breast-feeding in public," said Laura J. Best, a New York consultant and chief of a 24-hour breast-feeding information line, one of the city's unheralded resources, for Beth Israel Medical Center.

Having nursed a baby in New York City for more than a year, even at several weddings and a funeral, I never observed a hint of lewd or lascivious behavior (though as a constantly exhausted working parent I've tried, often, but futilely, to feel lascivious). So, like a number of mothers who are deeply committed to breast-feeding, I adopted some imaginative strategies for nursing in urban and professional settings.

"So long, silk!" read the fashion headlines of my maternal fantasies. "This year, wear hooks."

The very qualities that promote ease in breast-feeding are in short supply in New York City. As so many advice books are fond of noting, the milk-ejection reflex, or "let-down", is enhanced by relaxation and peace of mind. What's needed is a quiet, soothing place, an eddy in the torrent.

Now it can be told: It is difficult to achieve let-down when you are sitting in a stall in the ladies' room at the office, having discarded your work attire so you can have free range of motion with a funny clear plastic object that looks like a stunted clarinet, trying to think about your baby instead of the telephone and muttering, "I think I can, I think I can."

Some things the books don't tell you: Chief among them is what to say on a business trip when you must excuse yourself and mysteriously disappear for 20 or 30 minutes once every two to three hours. (The truth.)

Modesty is not something many women who have been through labor fret about. Many experts suggest that a mother with a baby traveling on an airplane nurse during takeoff and landing. Airlines honor special requests, but choosing row-mates and aisle-mates isn't one of them.

When it's not possible to bring the baby along, though, it's "Have pump, will travel." Which brings us to the delicate subject of etiquette. Surrounded on a flight early in my nursing career by men who didn't look as if they had the foresight to corner the market on baby wipes, I decided to play it safe and headed to the restroom. It wasn't long before I heard a flight attendant pounding on the door and yelling, "Miss! Miss! Are you all right?" Later, she apologized. It seems that the last passenger who monopolized the restroom that way had died.

I went back to my seat, aware that commandeering the limited facilities on a plane isn't nice, so I opted for the suffocating freedom of a blanket and a breast pump. On a city's street with an infant, you begin to think like a scout in the Wild West, seeking out friendly territory. Every nursing mom develops favorite places.

Nursing mothers are to ladies' rooms what Zagat's is to restaurants. The criteria include privacy, low noise levels, elbow room and cleanliness, with nursing-appropriate music and soothing decor an added plus.

But back to Florida. The idea of having a law to protect nursing mothers seems on its surface a little retrograde. From my experience, it is in the act of breast-feeding - a health and nutritional benefit for newborns - that a woman feels most at peace with the world, most comfortable in her own skin and most proud.

As Dr. Marvin S. Eiger, a co-author of the Complete Book of Breastfeeding (Workman, 1986), notes, breast-feeding is what breasts are made for. "Breast-feeding is the most natural thing in the world," he said.

But Ms. Best, the lactation consultant who also is an adviser to the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, said that she talked to numerous corporate mothers, accomplished grown-ups, who felt that "expressing milk would not be tolerated" at work. So they concealed their breast pumps upon returning to work. Women who punch a time clock have it rougher.

Maybe we do need protection, after all. Nursing is a fleeting moment. We have the rest of our lives to wear silk.